

**SURE START WESTON SUPER MARE**

**INVESTIGATING SERVICE QUALITY  
USING MYSTERY SHOPPING**

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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*By contributing to the understanding of what factors make a good quality service for parents and children.*

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# 1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

- 1.1. Sure Start Weston super Mare is a round four Sure Start local programme. The programme covers the Oldmixon, Coronation, Potteries and Bournville areas of Weston super Mare.

## Methods

- 1.2. An initial consultation was held with parents in the local community to provide information about the factors that contribute towards a good quality service. From this initial consultation, several mystery shopping scenarios were drawn up. A team of parent shoppers were recruited to carry out the mystery shopping. Parents made their enquiries, either by phone or in person as mystery shoppers, to assess the quality of a range of different services and activities.
- 1.3. Local service providers were asked for their agreement to be included in the mystery shopping exercise prior to the start of the research. In total, 7 telephone enquiries and 10 visits were made to local children's services to assess the quality of services and information signposting.

## Results

- 1.4. A number of factors were shown by the study to be important in providing a good quality service to parents and children. These are as follows:

<b>Staff Friendliness:</b>	<i>approachability, listening skills, helpful, supportive</i>
<b>Easy Access:</b>	<i>for buggies and wheelchairs, signs, facilities</i>
<b>Confidentiality:</b>	<i>privacy, staff awareness, questions asked</i>
<b>Privacy:</b>	<i>for sensitive issues, face to face contact, staff awareness</i>
<b>Signposting:</b>	<i>services, ease of access, quality of signposting</i>
<b>Leaflets/Information:</b>	<i>type of information, understandable, availability</i>
<b>Costs:</b>	<i>of activities, and travel</i>
<b>Groups/Activities:</b>	<i>types of groups, inclusion, parent confidence, staff input</i>
<b>Services/Feedback:</b>	<i>feedback from mystery shoppers</i>
<b>Clean:</b>	<i>environment, cleanliness, decoration, facilities</i>

- 1.5. The majority of enquiries included some of the above elements and as such provided some quality within their service and information providing. The most critical elements for parents revolve around staff and their skills in making people feel

attended to and welcome. Often this became more important than accessing the information they were sent to enquire about; where staff were friendly and helpful parents felt more comfortable and enquired in a more detailed way, even when no information was available. Staff at all levels act as gatekeepers to service information and provision.

- 1.6. Very few of the venues visited by mystery shoppers were considered to be child friendly. Those services who provide children's activities at the venue provided better quality children's areas than other venues. Even where children's areas were provided they were often poorly equipped and parents felt that they were not very stimulating for their children. Many venues at which parents may need to gain information are often large public buildings where parents feel that they receive negative attention when taking their children.
- 1.7. Mystery shoppers found privacy and confidentiality a problem when visiting venues to access information about children's services. As above, the venues for information are often large, public buildings with little space for privacy to discuss confidential matters. This could be a particular problem for parents who suffer from a lack of confidence, depression, or anxiety.
- 1.8. Key barriers which may hinder parents revolve around staff as gatekeepers, confusing signposting and information and the confidence levels of the enquirer. In one case a mystery shopper received a less than helpful approach from a member of staff and felt that it may have been their own fault for not enquiring clearly enough. A new parent in a similar situation may not ask for support twice.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

- 1.9. The consultation phase of the research identified key themes around staff, child friendliness and confidentiality/privacy, which were explored in more depth whilst interviewing the mystery shoppers. Front line staff are key gatekeepers who parents rely on to give accurate and timely information about services. For the mystery shoppers, staff attitude was often of greater importance than the need for the enquiry to be fulfilled immediately.
- 1.10. Very few of the venues where information is sought are child-friendly environments. Many are open, public buildings where parents feel uncomfortable taking their children. There is generally little stimulation for the children in these buildings, which makes enquiring much more difficult for the parent. Some venues did not have toilets for adults or children, no baby changing facilities and no private room for breastfeeding babies.
- 1.11. Front line staff are crucial in making parents feel comfortable about enquiring about services and information. Children's service providers should ensure that up to date information is passed to places where enquiries may be made. Front line staff should be made aware of the power they hold in this situation as the gatekeepers of critical information and services for local families. Space is often a precious commodity in organisations but private space is important when discussing confidential information and some provision should be made for this.

## **2. AIMS AND OBJECTIVES**

2.1. Sure Start Weston-super-Mare works closely with a range of local service providers who deliver services to families with young children.

2.2. This study aimed to answer the following evaluation questions:

- How do parents define a quality service?
- What is the quality of individual services and activities delivered by both Sure Start and local providers?
- How easy is it for families to access services in their area?
- What are the barriers that families may face when accessing services?

### **3. METHODS**

#### **Defining Quality**

- 3.1. The evaluation team attended a Sure Start Weston-super-Mare parent meeting in order to involve local families in the evaluation project and explain what the project involved. Six of the parents at that meeting expressed an interest in being involved and agreed to meet to discuss the factors that are important for them when using local services. Crèches were provided at all meetings held for parents.
- 3.2. Flyers inviting people to attend the initial planning meeting were designed and displayed in various Sure Start groups to encourage families who did not attend Sure Start parent meetings to be involved in the planning of the project (see Appendix 1).
- 3.3. Six parents attended the first planning meeting and as a group worked through a list of local services to explore what factors would make a high quality and family friendly service. The following services were discussed:

Sure Start Groups and Services	Speech and Language Enquiries
Local Nurseries	Voluntary Services
Social Services	Other parents
Housing Office	Health Issues
Library Service	Children's Information Service

#### **Recruiting the Mystery Shoppers**

- 3.4. In order to recruit a team of mystery shoppers, G.P records were used to identify households eligible for Sure Start services. A postcard advert was then sent to 298 households (a one in two sample) in the Sure Start Weston-super-Mare area with a child aged less than 4 years old.
- 3.5. The postcards explained that we needed to recruit a team of mystery shoppers to gain some insight into the quality of the local services. Mystery shoppers were offered ASDA vouchers as a reward for taking part. People were asked to telephone the Community Evaluation Unit to express an interest and full details of this postcard are provided in Appendix 2.
- 3.6. In total, 17 people telephoned to say that they were interested in becoming a mystery shopper. Names and contact details were taken from all the interested families and a series of questions were run through to enable us to match shoppers with relevant scenarios.

#### **The Scenarios**

- 3.7. From the comments given at the planning meetings with parents, several mystery shopping scenarios were designed (see Appendix 4). The mystery shopping scenarios included a range of telephone enquiries and visits to different services. When

designing the scenarios care was taken that we were not using precious resources in an unethical manner. In addition, we decided that it was appropriate to only shop services where this did not involve long or lengthy processes for the staff involved.

- 3.8. Each of the service providers were contacted by post to ask for their consent to be included as part of the mystery shopping process. It was explained that the mystery shopping would take place during a two month period and feedback would be given directly to each provider as well as shared with Sure Start Weston-super-Mare. It was felt that by specifying a long period for the mystery shopping to take place, staff would not be as aware of the shopping taking place as they may have been if it was carried out in a shorter time span. A copy of the letter sent to service providers can be found in Appendix 3.
- 3.9. A memo was sent to the staff team at Sure Start Weston-super-Mare and parents, informing them that their groups and services may be mystery shopped. Assurance was given that the project would be focusing on common themes across the services provided rather than seeking to find deficiencies within particular individual services.
- 3.10. In total, 7 phone enquiries and 10 visit enquiries were carried out by mystery shoppers. The enquiries were made at a number of services which work either directly with, or include access for, under 4's and their families in Weston-super-Mare. The table below shows the enquiry type, location and topic.

<b>Type of Enquiry</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Enquiring about...</b>
Phone	Nursery	Information on their service
Phone	Nursery	Information on their service
Phone	Sure Start	Information on their services and Speech and Language services
Phone	Sure Start	Information on parent involvement
Phone	Children's Information Service	Information on general children's services
Phone	Children's Information Service	Information on general children's services and childcare
Phone	Library	Information on their services and Speech and Language services
Visit	Sure Start	Information on their services and services for children over 4 years
Visit	Sure Start	Information on craft session and general services for children
Visit	Sure Start	Visit to group and information on general services for children
Visit	Sure Start	Visit to parents meeting
Visit	Various	Information on depression support
Visit	Children's Information Service	Information on childcare and outdoor play
Visit	Children's Information Service	Information on childcare and Speech and Language services
Visit	Health Centre	Information on smoking cessation
Visit	Library	Information on their services and Speech and Language services
Visit	Library	Information on their services and Speech and Language services

## **Common Themes**

3.11. The common themes that each shopper was asked to consider are listed below:

- Staff attitude
- Confidentiality
- Privacy
- Signposting
- Leaflets and information availability
- Costs

## **Briefing the Mystery Shoppers**

3.12. All mystery shoppers were briefed in their homes prior to carrying out the mystery shopping scenarios. This briefing session covered the factors and information about the scenarios and what shoppers needed to consider when 'shopping'. Having made sure that they felt comfortable with the scenarios, a time was arranged to return once they had completed the exercise, to talk through their experiences, record the information they had collected and give them their voucher. Shoppers were given a £10 ASDA voucher for visiting a service and a £5 ASDA voucher for each telephone enquiry as a thank you for their time.

3.13. Many of the shoppers reported that they had enjoyed the experience and were keen for us to keep their details if we needed them again. Families who expressed an interest in the mystery shopping but did not take part, were telephoned and thanked for offering their time to help with the evaluation.

3.14. The mystery shoppers ranged from approximately 20 to 35 years and the majority of them took their children with them when carrying out the scenarios in order to gain an accurate picture of what the services are like for families with young children.

## **Ethical Clearance**

3.15. Ethical clearance for the study was given by the Local Ethics Research Committee. In addition, the research was carried out in accordance with the ethical guidelines set out by the Social Research Association.

## 4. RESULTS

- 4.1. In total, 17 mystery shoppers were recruited to the mystery shopping team. Shoppers included a mixture of parents currently in contact with the Sure Start programme as well as those yet to use Sure Start services.

### What makes a Quality Service?

- 4.2. The following elements emerged through the interviews about the key themes investigated in the consultation phase:

- **Staff Friendliness:** includes approachability, listening skills, having the time, welcoming attitude, personal touch, helpful, supportive, go out of their way to help.
- **Easy Access:** includes access to buildings for buggies, access for wheelchairs, ease of access through doors, signs, facilities.
- **Confidentiality:** includes privacy, awareness, questions asked.
- **Privacy:** includes somewhere private to discuss sensitive issues, face to face contact, awareness.
- **Signposting:** includes services signposted, ease of access, quality of signposting.
- **Leaflets and Information Availability:** including type of information, accessibility, availability, understandable.
- **Costs:** includes costs of activities, cost of travel.
- **Groups / activities:** includes types of groups, inclusion, confidence of parents, staff input.
- **Clean:** includes the environment, cleanliness, decoration, facilities.

- 4.3. There appears to be a qualitative difference in the data between those who phoned and those who visited due to the nature of the experience. It is relevant to ask a visitor how they travelled to the venue and what the environment was like, whereas these are irrelevant questions for someone who has telephoned for information. These two groups have therefore been separated for analysis. The remainder of the data was analysed using thematic analysis, looking for trends that emerge in mystery shoppers experiences.

## Phone Enquiries

- 4.4. **First Contact:** On first contact the majority of mystery shoppers had their phone calls answered within a reasonable amount of time. No shoppers reported that it took a long time or that they were dissatisfied with the length of time they waited.
- 4.5. **Information from First Contact:** All of the mystery shoppers had to wait to have their questions answered; the front line staff who answer phones do not generally have the information required by the mystery shoppers.
- 4.6. **Availability of Specific Staff:** Three mystery shoppers were put through to the relevant staff member immediately; all three had all of their questions answered. One mystery shopper was relayed the answers by the person who answered the phone via asking someone else in the office. The three remaining mystery shoppers were signposted to other services and information which was sent through the post to them. Of those who had been posted information none had received it at time of interview and as such any assessment of the information given has not been possible.
- 4.7. **Signposting:** Signposting was undertaken by all agencies where specific staff were not available to answer queries, however in two cases the agencies signposted were not relevant to the enquiry being made. In one instance the correct person, contact number and time of availability were given in order that the mystery shopper could contact them directly at their own convenience. One agency signposted a very general source (health visitor) of information for children's services and provided no further information.
- 4.8. **Staff Attitude:** All of the front line staff who answered phones were described by mystery shoppers as at least helpful if not '*very, very helpful*'. One mystery shopper felt the approachability of staff was '*mind settling*'; all mystery shoppers describe the nerves that can be involved in phoning someone for information. Key words in the description of front line staff include: helpful, friendly, reassuring, encouraging, interested, supportive, and good.
- 4.9. **Information Given:** Despite the helpfulness of staff not all mystery shoppers found the information they originally phoned for. Despite this every caller was promised information either via post or through talking to someone else.
- 4.10. **Perceived Problems:** Four of the seven mystery shoppers perceived no problems with the service they received. Two of the perceived problems concern geographical funding areas for certain services; one service provider was quite forceful in taking the postcode at the beginning of the call, whilst the other did not ask until the end and discovered that all of the information given was incorrect. The final perceived problem revolved around a lack of information from the source and no signposting for further information.
- 4.11. **Mystery? Shopper:** Four of the seven phone enquiry mystery shoppers believed that the service provider was unaware that they were assessing the service. Two were unsure but felt that they had not been uncovered. One mystery shopper revealed the

nature of the enquiry (as a mystery shopping exercise), although they felt it did not affect the outcome as this was done at the end of the call.

- 4.12. **Additional:** In addition one parent stated that they felt confident to follow up the call they had initially made and one parent was put in touch with other local parents in a similar situation.

## Visit Enquiries

- 4.13. **Travel:** With the exception of the visits surrounding information gathering for services related to depression, the majority of mystery shoppers took around 15 minutes or less to arrive at the service providers. One mystery shopper drove to the destination, another part drove and part walked, another got on a bus. The remainder of the mystery shoppers walked to their destination or did not state how they travelled. None of the mystery shoppers reported any serious problems with the travel to or from services.
- 4.14. **Attendees:** Mystery shoppers were asked to assess the child friendliness of the services they were visiting and as such six of the visit based mystery shoppers took their children along with them. The number of children taken along ranged from one to five, although they were not necessarily all under the age of 4 years. Four of the mystery shoppers did not take their children along to the visit.
- 4.15. **Access:** When discussing access with mystery shoppers two key aspects arise; physical access to the building and signs showing access points to buildings or groups. Seven mystery shoppers reported that the buildings they visited had access for prams and buggies, although large doors were mentioned as a difficulty even where a ramp is provided. Some of the sites are particularly child oriented and as such have excellent access. Two mystery shoppers mentioned signs in relation to access, one stating there were excellent signs and another stating there were none at all. Some aspects of this theme will be revisited under 'facilities'.
- 4.16. **Initial Staff Contact:** Depending on the nature of the service being reviewed some parents were required to phone ahead to discover the times and locations of groups. Five mystery shoppers attempted to phone the service provider before visiting them. One could not get through, a further two were given no help or information over the phone before their visit, including one mystery shopper who was sent to the wrong organisation. One mystery shopper was required to make an appointment and had no problems with that process. The remainder of the mystery shoppers either did not need to speak to someone as they had attended before or went straight along to the visit.
- 4.17. **Environment:** Those mystery shoppers who did discuss the environment they visited were quite critical. The environments are often described by mystery shoppers as very busy, large, dull looking and unfriendly places. Very few mystery shoppers were shown around the building/area. Those attending pre-arranged groups found that other group members could sometimes be a little insular and relied upon staff to welcome them to the group. Some environments from the scenarios are specifically for children and mystery shoppers who visited these with children felt less self

conscious and more comfortable about having their children with them. One mystery shopper felt their nerves were eased once they realised that other children were running around the public areas of the building.

- 4.18. **Facilities:** Mystery shoppers were asked to observe what facilities are available for parents and children at the service visited including toilets, baby changing facilities and breastfeeding facilities. Three mystery shoppers complained that signs to the service they were visiting were not easily visible. Four mystery shoppers were not given an opportunity to see if these facilities existed as they were directed straight to the group/information. Very few of the venues had baby changing or breastfeeding facilities; mystery shoppers who did ask about them were generally told that if there was some space they could use it but that no space was specifically allocated.
- 4.19. **Staff Attitude on Visit:** Views on the friendliness and approachability of staff were divided. Five mystery shoppers felt that the service received from front line staff they dealt with was unsatisfactory. Four mystery shoppers were pleased by the friendliness of staff, one mystery shopper did not mention staff at all. Common complaints made where staff were perceived as unhelpful include; staff are busy, rushed and indifferent, staff do not encourage participation in a group situation, service is impersonal (i.e. by phone despite being there in person), staff are unapproachable. On the flip side three mystery shoppers stated that they received excellent staff attitude. Common themes that occur when staff are perceived as helpful include: staff making the initial contact friendly and welcoming, staff being encouraging and non-judgemental, staff being reassuring and approachable. The way in which the mystery shoppers were dealt with by staff had a major impact on their overall perception of the service.
- 4.20. **Child Friendliness:** As previously mentioned, mystery shoppers were asked to assess the child friendliness of the service they visited. Four of the mystery shoppers did not comment on the environment for children. The comments made correlate very closely to the comments made about the environment. Those services which are centred around children rather than parents tended to have more provision to stimulate children. Four of the six venues about which mystery shoppers made comments made some provision, although the quality varied. Two of those were very positive stating that the venue provided toys and stimulating opportunities for play and these parents felt more comfortable about having their children with them. In the remaining venues, although providing space for children, it was not felt to be of such a good quality. One venue is described as dull and dismal, the other was a very quiet environment and as such the mystery shoppers felt aware that their children were receiving attention. Two of the venues were highly criticised by the mystery shoppers as there is no provision for children at all whilst the parents' attention is diverted making enquiries. One mystery shopper stated that there was '*nothing for the kids...(they) get agitated*'. Also within this theme it has been noted that often there are no basic amenities for babies and young children, for example children's toilets and space for breastfeeding (see facilities above).
- 4.21. **Privacy/Confidentiality:** Mystery shoppers were asked to think about privacy and confidentiality for enquiries whilst visiting the service. Three mystery shoppers talked about privacy and confidentiality in a negative light. Often the venues for access to the services are large organisational buildings (unless specifically for children's services) with very little private space. Those spaces allocated to public

use are very public indeed and not necessarily private places to give personal information. In some cases information is not given person to person but is done via telephone. The scenario involving information for depression was particularly sensitive to confidentiality issues, and it was found that often there is nowhere private to take down numbers or contact details for someone suffering from depression.

- 4.22. **Information Available:** The quality and format of the information received by the mystery shoppers varied greatly. Some were given no information or misleading/easily misunderstood information. The majority of venues had some kind of information to go away with, ranging from verbal information given in person to be followed up by post, to leaflets to take away. Many mystery shoppers felt that they had only been given partial information and did not always find out exactly what they wanted to know, or get the opportunity to ask further questions. The mystery shopping scenario involving information on depression from many venues was found to be particularly difficult, with very little accessible information being held across different venues.
- 4.23. **Signposting:** Overall mystery shoppers' experiences of signposting were confusing for them. Many mystery shoppers were directed to services that could not help with their enquiry, one mystery shopper was signposted to the phone number of the service that they were visiting. Four mystery shoppers did not require any signposting as they were attending existing groups rather than asking specifically for information.
- 4.24. **Costs:** This is a theme originally drawn from consultation with parents over what a quality service would give information about. The majority of mystery shoppers were given this information upon request with the exception of one.
- 4.25. **Mystery? Shopper:** All ten of the mystery shoppers felt that they had not been exposed during the exercise.
- 4.26. **Additional:** Many shoppers felt that the service they received was not personal or aimed at them as a valued user group, '*...it was just a procedure, they didn't make it easy or nice*'. The majority of mystery shoppers discussed the nerves involved in going along and this is often alleviated (or made worse) by front line staff that deal with enquiries. The organisational nature of some of the buildings is not necessarily family friendly, '*...it's so dull and dark and dismal*'. This can make it difficult and could discourage families taking young children along with them, creating access problems.
- 4.27. **Overall/Recommendations:** Front line staff are very important in providing quality information to service users. Many of the mystery shoppers felt nervous about approaching services for information and this is often affected by staff's conduct. Those mystery shoppers that were welcomed, shown around and included felt more at ease with the service and asking questions. Privacy is another big concern for the mystery shoppers, especially when seeking information on sensitive matters or giving personal information. Some of the mystery shoppers were discouraged by the quality of the information they received, some were still awaiting posted information at time of interview. Few mystery shoppers stated that they were really happy with the level and types of information they received, although all came away with some kind of information or signposting to the information.

## 5. DISCUSSION

5.1. This section considers the evaluation questions that were set out at the start of the evaluation.

- How do parents define a quality service?
- What is the quality of individual services and activities delivered by both Sure Start and local providers?
- How easy is it for services to be accessed?
- What are the barriers that families may face when accessing services?

### How do parents define a quality service?

5.2. The consultation exercise held with six local parents identified some initial areas related to quality of service. These included staff attitude, confidentiality, privacy, signposting, leaflets/information available and costs. These common themes were built in to the scenarios for the mystery shoppers to consider; as such many of the themes appear within the data.

5.3. Mystery shoppers were able to expand on these core themes as they discussed their experiences of making enquiries at local children's services. The themes were found to include specific elements related to good quality service, as shown below:

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Elements</b>
Staff friendliness	Attitude to children, approachability, listening skills, having the time, welcoming, attitude, personal touch, helpful, supportive, go out of their way to help
Easy access	Access for buggies, access for wheelchairs, ease of access through doors, signs, facilities
Confidentiality	Privacy, awareness, questions asked
Privacy	Somewhere private to discuss sensitive issues, face to face contact, awareness
Signposting	Services signposted, ease of access, quality of signposting, knowledge of staff
Leaflets/Information	Type of information, accessibility, availability, understandable
Costs	Costs of activities, costs of travel
Groups/activities	Type of groups, inclusion, confidence of parent, staff input
Services/feedback	Feedback from mystery shoppers
Clean	The environment, cleanliness, decoration, facilities

- 5.4. The elements noted in the table are critical to assessments about the quality of the service/information provision by children's service providers. For example, staff attitude appears to have more impact than the accessing of information. If a mystery shopper phoned in about an enquiry the attitude of the staff was talked about more than the information (or lack of) received.

### **What is the quality of individual services and activities delivered by both Sure Start and local providers?**

- 5.5. Mystery shoppers had very varied experiences which perhaps indicate that the enquirer has as much influence in the type of service provided as the provider. For example, one of the mystery shoppers is an Early Years practitioner and the information collected by the shopper tended to focus on the quality of play rather than the general quality of service.
- 5.6. There appears to be a difference in the data between those who are enquiring for information or support with issues and those who are visiting/attending a structured group and looking to meet other parents/children. Those who are phoning for information are expecting a different type of service or response than those attending a group/activity who may be more concerned with being included in a group than the type of information they receive.
- 5.7. Information on sensitive issues, such as depression, appears to be quite difficult to access outside of Sure Start local programmes, especially for one suffering from the difficulties which may be associated with depression.

### **How easy is it for services to be accessed?**

- 5.8. Often before the visit based enquiries mystery shoppers made initial phone calls which were generally not responded to very quickly, however this is not reflected in the phone based enquiries where phones were answered quickly. This initial contact acts as a gateway and is crucial to the rest of the experience for the service user in terms of the services they access and the way they feel about that service.
- 5.9. Staff are key gatekeepers and have a lot of influence on how easy it is to access service information, signposting and activities. Front line staff often do not have the depth of information required by service users and have to refer. This process is most successful where information givers have correct, up to date information. Staff attitude is crucial for service users as often services are very busy places. Where front line staff took time to welcome and encourage service users the information was received with more confidence and mystery shoppers came away with more relevant information than if they felt they were interrupting.
- 5.10. Access to information itself is crucial to understanding and feeling comfortable about accessing a service/activity. Literacy issues, although not directly affecting any of the mystery shoppers, is crucial when distributing leaflets, booklets and putting up posters. Verbal information reinforced by written information seems to be preferred

by service users, although with the busy nature of many services a long verbal explanation is often not possible, or private.

### **What are the barriers that families may face when accessing services?**

- 5.11. One of the key barriers to emerge from the mystery shopper data is front line staff, although they can also be the one resource that breaks barriers as well. A warm welcome and a helpful approach, even if the information cannot be accessed impacts on the mystery shoppers. Many talk more about the staff attitude and behaviour than they do about facilities and environment.
- 5.12. Mystery shoppers were taken from the local area and as such have some experiences of the local area and local services and this knowledge affects the way they go about looking and asking for service information. Local knowledge still helps to make decisions about services once information is sought, this may bring up issues for parents who are new to the area or lack confidence.
- 5.13. Another key barrier to services concerns information and signposting. In many cases mystery shoppers were misinformed, suffered from a lack of relevant information and were sometimes even signposted to the wrong organisation. Parents may take a lack of information or signposting from a source as a reflection on themselves. One mystery shopper viewed it as their own fault for not being clear about what service or information they require. This may affect subsequent confidence levels and the ability of the service user to enquire further about the required services.
- 5.14. The child friendliness of the environment is a barrier referred to by the mystery shoppers. Often the services are located in large, organisational buildings which are not necessarily designed for face to face contact or for children in particular. Consequentially a full time parent may not feel that they can access the service whilst they are caring for their children during the day. Several of the environments visited by the mystery shoppers had no provision for children at all, not even toilets. Once parents are tied up with their enquiries it can be difficult to concentrate on the children and make constructive enquiries, especially if also experiencing the barriers mentioned above.

### **Reflections on the mystery shopping method**

- 5.15. There were a number of positive outcomes as a result of the method used. On one particular occasion a parent was required to gain information about support for stopping smoking. In fact this parent after getting the information chose to make an appointment and even set a quit date to work towards.
- 5.16. Other parents who were involved in the mystery shopping process had not been in contact with Sure Start before. However, some of these parents commented that they would look at the other services offered by Sure Start Weston super Mare as a result of being involved in the mystery shopping exercise.

- 5.17. One difficulty that the evaluation team faced in using the method was a small number of parents who for a variety of reasons did not carry out the mystery shopping as intended. For example in a small number of cases the parents may have been briefed about the exercise but then were uncontactable or unable to carry the exercise out. In a small number of other cases, parents missed appointments which the team had previously agreed with them. These factors can add additional workload for what can then result in little or no data return for these small numbers of cases.
- 5.18. When calling or visiting Sure Start local programmes as a mystery shopper there can be a problem with the location of volunteers as many tried to avoid giving their address and postcode for fear they would be 'caught out'. This cut short some enquiries and did not allow full investigation in to how service providers would handle a service user from outside the funding area.
- 5.19. Any future mystery shopping may want to consider incorporating a general satisfaction or quality rating from mystery shoppers in order that the analysis can consider how different themes contribute to the overall satisfaction rating. This could be undertaken on a thematic basis, i.e. friendliness of staff, facilities, and travel to and from venues and so on.
- 5.20. There may be advantages in making the reporting more structured. Although it is a qualitative piece of fieldwork, the 'researchers' are not qualitatively trained and may find it easier to have a more structured reporting framework, this would also benefit comparisons within the analysis.
- 5.21. The methods could also be used as a two phase process; 1) accessing the information and 2) attending a group or activity and this may enhance the data analysis. The data seems to indicate that different aspects are important in these two situations. For example, accessing information is reliant on how welcoming the service is, the amount of physical information and signposting. Group attendance tends to be more about getting over nerves, the staff, other parents and feeling included.
- 5.22. If one general enquiry is established the information from different services (for example with regard to signposting), can be compared across services. Currently it is difficult to establish whether mystery shoppers were given information about all of the services they can access in a particular field as there is no complete registry of information to compare to.

## 6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Conclusions

- 6.1. In the consultation phase of the research local parents identified what they consider to be key themes around quality of service. These included staff friendliness, access, confidentiality/privacy, signposting, costs, groups/activities, and services/feedback. Many of these themes emerged in the data.
- 6.2. There was a difference in the quality of data between the phone enquiries and the visit enquiries, which were analysed separately. Different themes emerged as being important to a parent on a visit to an organisation as compared to on the phone. For example, it may be very pertinent how a parent travels to a venue for a group, whereas during a phone call for information this is not relevant.
- 6.3. Front line staff who answer the phones generally do not hold the information required by callers. The way in which they signpost other services and speak to the enquirer impacts upon the perception of the quality of service. Some parents were signposted to organisations which had nothing to do with their enquiry whilst others were helped very specifically with their requests for information. Overall signposting was a confusing experience for mystery shoppers.
- 6.4. Staff are key gatekeepers and have a lot of influence over how easy it is to access service information, signposting and activities. Staff attitude was identified and elaborated on by parents at the consultation phase and appeared to be a very strong theme in the data. Those who phoned appeared more satisfied with the level of staff 'helpfulness', even when the necessary information was not available. Those who visited venues came into contact with several layers of staff and views about their attitudes were divided. The key aspects of unhelpful staff include; not approachable, having no time to devote attention to the enquiry/being too busy, no encouragement for nervous new parents and an impersonal service.
- 6.5. Privacy and confidentiality was a theme more noted in the visits than the phone calls. When in situ mystery shoppers were more likely to note the lack of privacy in the open publicly oriented venues they visited. Often the comments made were in a negative light, mystery shoppers had to give personal information in non-private settings. This was felt to be especially detrimental if a parent had low confidence.
- 6.6. Child friendly environments were generally found only by visitors in those places which are specifically child-oriented (Sure Start, nurseries). Many parents felt that they were receiving negative attention from the public because they had taken their children along to the enquiry, making them feel uncomfortable. Very few venues had good provision for children, some did not have basic amenities such as children's toilets and baby changing rooms.

## **Recommendations**

- 6.7. Front line staff are critical in making parents feel confident about enquiring about services they may require. Even if a member of staff is unable to provide the information themselves, further details should be provided to the parent in an encouraging manner. Regardless of whether enquiries are made by phone or in person, quality and presentation of information should be the same.
- 6.8. Many parents were confused by the signposting provided by some organisations. Organisations should be clear where they are signposting parents and for what reasons. This could put a parent off accessing a service all together. If no information is available the enquirer should be contacted with the correct information when it is available.
- 6.9. Children's services are mainly open during office hours and as such it can be difficult for parents to attend without bringing young children along. This can make it difficult for parents to concentrate on the enquiry at hand. Provision of quality children's areas and facilities for young children (toilets, changing room) are essential for parents to rate a service as of high quality.
- 6.10. Often when making enquiries a lot of personal information is given to staff in very public places, this made some parents feel uncomfortable. This is especially pertinent when considering issues such as parents with low confidence levels, discussing certain issues such as financing childcare, or even giving a name and address in what could be described as a public arena. Lack of space to provide room for discussion of private/sensitive matters is a problem and an attempt should be made to provide such space.

## **Next Steps**

- 6.11. Examples of good practice can be found within all settings. Good practice for mystery shoppers in this piece of evaluation appears to revolve around the people they come in to contact with whilst making their enquiries. The attitude and manner of front line staff is crucial to the levels of confidence of local parents. Where information could not be located the attitudes of staff can ensure that a local parent has the confidence to call back and try again. Even in those instances where information was located, if the staff were unhelpful or unfriendly it was perceived as a bad quality service by the mystery shoppers. Common themes that occur when staff are perceived as helpful include, staff making the initial contact friendly and welcoming, staff being encouraging and non-judgemental, and staff being reassuring and approachable. The way in which mystery shoppers were dealt with by staff had a major impact on their overall perception of the service.
- 6.12. The data suggests that information and signposting, especially concerning services for children, confuses parents as it is often misleading, complex or wrong. It is important that local parents are sent to the right places for the right problems in order to encourage participation more widely in community issues. Information packs sent to any point where someone may ask for information regarding these services would be helpful to parents. Front line staff of all services should be aware of the information

they hold which is available to take away, and should endeavour to verbally explain any leaflets they distribute.

- 6.13. Providers of services for families and children can use the findings in the report as a checklist to consider how their service provides for families and children. This will help to ensure that services are willing and able to respond to the needs of parents and children when they seek information or advice regarding children's services.

# APPENDICES



**PARENT FLYERS**

**APPENDIX 1**





# Parent's Meeting

## Parent's Meeting



Thursday 17th June

1 pm — 3 pm

Sure Start Factory

At the next Parents Meeting the Evaluation Team will be coming along to discuss evaluation plans

We are looking for families to tell us what makes a high quality service and see whether these standards are being met locally

We will be arranging some group chats and activities to work out what high quality services are

Mystery Shopping will follow soon so let us know if you would like to take part

Please come along and meet us and help us get things moving

**Come along and get involved!**





# Mystery Shopping Planning Sessions

10:00 am - Monday 5th July 2004

OR

1:00 pm - Thursday 8th July 2004

at the

Sure Start Factory



Please ring Kath or  
Bridget on 01823 344418 if  
you want to attend or just  
turn up on the day!

A crèche is available—ring Tina  
on 01934 416422





**POSTCARD**

**APPENDIX 2**



**DO YOU HAVE A YOUNG CHILD?  
WOULD YOU LIKE TO EARN AN ASDA VOUCHER?**

We need a team of mystery shoppers to try out a range of local services

**This could be your chance to try something different, help your community  
and earn a voucher for your time**

**We are looking for volunteers to visit local services available for families  
with young children and then tell us how it went**

**If you would like to get involved or ask any questions please  
call Kath or Bridget from the Community Evaluation Team on  
01823 344418**







**Community Evaluation Unit  
Dorset and Somerset Evaluation Service  
Dorset and Somerset NHS**  
Wellsprings Road  
Taunton  
Somerset  
TA2 7PQ

Tel: 01823 333491  
Fax: 01823 272710

15 July 2004

Dear

We are working with Sure Start Weston-super-Mare to gather feedback from families regarding local services. The aim of this work is purely to help develop services in line with local need and we would appreciate it if your service was willing to be involved in this exciting project.

In order to gather this feedback we have recruited a team of mystery shoppers who are local Sure Start families. Together we have designed a series of scenarios and enquiries for them to carry out which they feel are typical every day situations.

Obviously the information gathered will only provide a snap shot of what it is like to access services as our project does not have the scope to mystery shop every local service on a range of different queries. Any conclusions drawn will focus on general themes across services and we will be able to provide you with some feedback. We hope that valuable information will be gained that will allow us to assess the accessibility of services and identify whether any changes could be made to make services more user friendly.

During the planning stage we have taken care to ensure that none of the scenarios waste service providers time and all information gained from general enquiries can be used as part of the report.

Please let me know whether you are happy for your service to be included in this project, I can be contacted on 01823 344418 or by email: [kwilliams@somerset.nhs.uk](mailto:kwilliams@somerset.nhs.uk). Mystery shopping is planned to take place between now and the end of September so a prompt response would be much appreciated. If you have any queries or would like to discuss this piece of work any further then please do not hesitate to call me.

Yours sincerely

**Katherine Williams**  
**Evaluation Officer (acting)**



**SCENARIOS**

**APPENDIX 4**



**CIS Mystery Shopper Visit**  
**Enquiring about childcare places and funding**

**Getting there**

How did you get to the CIS?  
How long did it take you?  
What was your journey like?  
Who did you take with you?  
Was there buggy access?

**Opening Times**

What are the opening times of the CIS?  
Are these times convenient for you and your family?

**Initial Impressions**

How was your enquiry dealt with? What was the process?  
Was the person you needed to speak to available?  
How long did it take for them to come and meet you? How did you feel about this wait?  
Did you feel that you could ask questions?  
How approachable were the staff?  
Did they have enough time to help you?

**The Facilities**

Was there somewhere private for you to talk?  
What are your thoughts on the general environment?  
Was it a child friendly place?

**Information Given**

What information were you given about childcare in your area?  
How helpful was the information given?  
Is there any type of financial help in paying childcare costs?  
Do you now have enough information to take your enquiry further?

**General**

Do you have any more comments on your experience with the CIS?  
Would you recommend the service to others?  
Could anything be done to make the service more family friendly?  
Do you think they knew you were a mystery shopper?

**Signposting Task (shopper 1)**

***“What would I do if I was worried about my child’s language development?”***

What response did you get? How helpful is this?  
Do you feel you would be able to deal with the issue from the information given?  
Did people seem to do their best to help?

## **Signposting Task (shopper 2)**

*“Are there any family friendly parks and play areas you can tell me about in Weston? Are they well maintained and good for older and younger children?”*

What response did you get? How helpful is this?

Do you feel you would be able to deal with the issue from the information given?

Did people seem to do their best to help?

### **CIS Mystery Shopper Telephone Call 1** **Enquiring about childcare places and funding**

**I am thinking about returning to work and need to look into whether childcare would be available for my children and how much it would cost?**

**Ask whether there is anything flexible available as your job may require working a few evening shifts.**

**Is there anything to help me pay for it?**

How long did it take to get through?

Was the person you spoke to able to help?

What information were you given?

Did they have anything they could send you?

What is the next step of your enquiry?

How friendly and helpful were they?

Could anything have been done differently?

Would you feel able to follow up your enquiry with the information given?

Do you think they knew you were a mystery shopper?

### **CIS Mystery Shopper Telephone Call 2** **Enquiring about activity groups for children**

**I was hoping you could tell me what activities there are for families in Weston to give us something to do.**

**I was thinking about toddler groups or just something that I can meet other parents.**

**Is there anything that I could do on my own without my children? In the evenings or daytimes when they go to school?**

How long did it take to get through?

Was the person you spoke to able to help?

What information were you given?

Did they have anything they could send you?

What is the next step of your enquiry?

How friendly and helpful were they?

Could anything have been done differently?

Would you feel able to follow up your enquiry with the information given?

Do you think they knew you were a mystery shopper?

### **Health Centre Mystery Shopper Visit**

#### **The Enquiry – Find out about giving up smoking**

Where did you go to find out about giving up smoking?

#### **Getting There**

How did you get to the health centre?

How long did it take you?

What was your journey like?

Was there buggy access to the building?

Was it clear where you were going?

#### **Initial Impressions**

Did anyone greet you?

Did the staff welcome you and your children?

How approachable were the staff?

Did you have to wait to talk to someone at all?

#### **Information Given**

What information were you given?

Do you feel that this would be helpful to someone considering giving up smoking?

Were you able to take any leaflets away with you?

Did you feel encouraged to find out more about giving up?

#### **General**

Do you have any more comments on your experience?

Could anything be done to have made it easier for you?

### **Health Centre Mystery Shopper Telephone Call**

#### **You are having problems breast feeding – can they help or suggest where you can go?**

How long did it take to get through?

Was the person you spoke to able to help?

What information were you given?

How friendly and helpful were they?

Could anything have been done differently?

Would you feel able to follow up your enquiry with the information given?

### **Parent Meeting Mystery Shopper visit**

**When you are at the next parents meeting have a think about the conversations that are going on between people.**

Obviously some people are friends but are the general conversations appropriate?

Do you feel that people get too personal?

How does it feel to be in that situation?

What would be like if you were coming along for the first time?

Did you feel that people tried to involve you in the conversation?

Were you able to contribute to the meeting in general?

Do you have anymore comments on your experience?

Could anything be done to have made it easier for you?

### **Library Service Mystery Shopper Visit**

#### **Getting there**

How did you get to the library?

How long did it take you?

What was your journey like?

Who did you take with you?

Was there buggy access?

#### **Opening Times**

Was the library open when you got there?

What are the opening times? How do they fit in with your family?

#### **Taking Your Children**

How did you feel about taking children into the library?

Did you notice any reactions from other people in the library?

Did the staff welcome you and your children?

Are there any toilet/baby changing facilities in the library? How did you feel about this?

If there were facilities did you think they were suitable?

#### **Joining the Library**

Was there someone available to help you join the library?

Did you have what you needed to join?

Were you told that your child/children could join?

#### **Information Given**

How approachable were the staff?

Did you feel you could ask for help?

Did they have enough time to help you?

When you joined did you get a good explanation of book borrowing/CD's etc?

Were you told how to renew items?

Did you receive any information on using the computer facilities?

What services are available for your children? Were the staff able to tell you or provide any leaflets?

Were the library fines explained to you? Did they seem reasonable?

### **Children's Area**

Is there a children's area?

What did you and your children think of it? Is it practical?

How did you feel about the range of books/activities available?

Would there be anywhere to breast feed? How suitable is the area if there is one?

### **General**

Do you have any more comments on your experience?

Would you visit the library again?

Could anything be done to make it more family friendly?

Do you think they knew you were a mystery shopper?

### **Signposting Task**

***“What would I do if I was worried about my child's language development?”***

What response did you get? How helpful is this?

Do you feel you would be able to deal with the issue from the information given?

Did people seem to do their best to help?

### **Telephone Mystery Shopper – Library Service 1**

I have a son aged 3 and was wondering if the library runs anything we can come along to?

I am a bit worried about his speech development – he seems to be speaking slower than other children his age and when he does talk its very mumbled. Do you know what I should do?

How long did it take to get through?

Was the person you spoke to able to help?

What information were you given?

How friendly and helpful were they?

Would you have been interested in the activities offered?

Could anything have been done differently?

### **Telephone Mystery Shopper – Library Service 2**

How do we go about joining the library?

Can my children join?

How long did it take to get through?

Was the person you spoke to able to help?

What information were you given?

Did you feel encouraged to join?

How friendly and helpful were they?

Would you have been interested in the activities offered?

Could anything have been done differently?

## **Parents Mystery Shopper Visit**

### **The Enquiry – Find out about the Time Out Group**

How did you find out about the Time Out group?  
What do they involve?  
Does the group appeal to you?  
How helpful was the person that you spoke to?  
Did they have the information to give you? Were they fully informed?  
Did you feel encouraged to attend?

### **Getting There**

How did you get to Time Out?  
How long did it take you?  
What was your journey like?  
Was there buggy access to the building?  
Was it clear where you were going?

### **Initial Impressions**

Did anyone greet you?  
What was it like turning up on your own?  
Did the staff welcome you and your children?  
How approachable were the staff?  
How friendly were the other parents?  
Did any parents introduce themselves?  
Would you say it was an open or closed group feeling?

### **Appropriateness**

Did you get any impression of the way parents at the group relate to newcomers?  
Did you feel that the conversations or the language used were appropriate between the parents?  
Did you ever feel too probed or uneasy at all?  
Was personal information asked? How do you feel about this?

### **The Group Itself**

Was it as you expected it to be?  
Did you gain anything from going to the group?  
Would you be interested in going again?  
Did you feel that you could get more involved in the group if you wanted to? E.g. making teas etc.

### **General**

Do you have anymore comments on your experience?  
Would you visit a Sure Start group again?  
Could anything be done to make it easier for new families to come to groups?  
Do you think they knew that you were a mystery shopper?

### **Signposting Task**

***“I don’t really know much about Sure Start, what else is there that you go to? Is it any good?”***

What response did you get? How helpful is this?  
Do you feel you know more about Sure Start from what you were told?  
Did people seem to do their best to tell you about Sure Start?

## **Parents Telephone Mystery Shopper**

**You have been regularly going to one of the Sure Start groups and you now have a bit more time on your hands and you were wondering how the parent groups works?**

**What happens at the meetings?**

**Would there be someone you could chat to about how much of their time it takes up and what its like to be in meetings etc?**

How long did it take to get through?

Was the person you spoke to able to help?

What information were you given?

How friendly and helpful were they?

Did you feel encouraged to get more involved?

Could anything have been done differently?

Would you feel able to follow up your enquiry with the information given?

## **Sure Start Mystery Shopper Visit - Enquiry**

### **Getting There**

How did you get to Sure Start?

How long did it take you?

What was your journey like?

Who did you take with you?

Was there buggy access to the building?

Was it clear where you were going?

### **The Enquiry**

What information were you looking for?

What led to your enquiry?

### **Initial Impressions**

Did the staff welcome you and your children?

Was the person you needed to speak to available?

Did you feel that you could ask for help?

How approachable were the staff?

Did they have enough time to help you?

### **Taking Your Children**

How did you feel about taking children with you?

Are there any toilet/baby changing facilities at Sure Start? How did you feel about this?

If there were facilities did you think they were suitable?

Would there be anywhere to breast feed? How suitable is the area if there is one?

### **Information Given**

What information were you given?

Was your enquiry answered?

Did the information that you were given match what you hoped for?

Did the person you were talking to seem fully informed to be able to help you?

### **General**

Do you have any more comments on your experience?

Would you visit Sure Start again?

Could anything be done to make it more family friendly?

Do you think they knew that you were a mystery shopper?

### **Signposting Task (mystery shopper 1)**

***“Is there anything like Sure Start available for my older children? Are there any groups being run for them to be involved in?”***

What response did you get? How helpful is this?

Do you feel you would be able to deal with the issue from the information given?

Did people seem to do their best to help?

### **Signposting Task (mystery shopper 2)**

***“What other groups and activities does Sure Start run?” – ask staff***

***“Do you go to any other Sure Start groups? What’s on and what are they like?” – ask parents***

What response did you get? How helpful is this?

Do you feel you would be able to get more involved with Sure Start from the information given?

Did people seem to do their best to help?

### **Sure Start Mystery Shopper Telephone 1 – Speech and Language**

**I am a bit worried that my son isn’t saying as much as other children his age.**

**He is 2 ½ and when he does talk he is not very clear with his words.**

**Is there someone I can speak to about it?**

When asked where you live say on Stradling Avenue (outside of the Sure Start area). Can they still help you?

How long did it take to get through?

Was the person you spoke to able to help?

What information were you given?

What is the next step for helping you with your enquiry?

How friendly and helpful were they?

Could anything have been done differently?

Would you feel able to follow up your concerns with the information given?

Do you think they knew you were a mystery shopper?

## **Sure Start Mystery Shopper Telephone 2 – Interest in Parent Meetings**

**You are a parent living in the Sure Start area and have been along to several Sure Start groups but you would like to get more involved and find out about the parent group. Say you are a bit nervous about turning up on your own.**

How long did it take to get through?

Was the person you spoke to able to help?

What information were you given?

What is the next step of your enquiry?

Did you feel encouraged to get more involved?

Was anything said to make you feel less nervous about turning up on your own?

Did they put you in touch with any other parents?

How friendly and helpful were they?

Could anything have been done differently?

Would you feel able to follow up your enquiry with the information given?

Do you think they knew you were a mystery shopper?

## **Voluntary Services Mystery Shopper Task**

**Put yourself in the shoes of someone experiencing some of the following issues:**

- **Domestic Abuse**
- **Post Natal Depression**
- **Being the victim of crime**
- **Feeling isolated and that you don't have anyone to share your problems with**

**For 1 week when you go to the places you usually visit in a week please keep an eye out for any information on services and organisations that you feel would help with the above.**

Where did you come across any of the information?

What format was it in? i.e. poster, leaflet, advert.

Could you read it or take information without being overlooked?

What do you think of the different information you found?

Is it clear what service is offered?

Is there a free phone number?

Do they advertise confidentiality?

Are there any local groups advertised?

Would you be able to see someone in person or is it all on the phone?

Is there a 24 hour help line available?

**After the first week of not necessarily looking for this information try and find it in a few places you would expect it to be.**

Where do you look and what information do you find?

How easy or hard was it to find?

Is there a free phone number?

Do they advertise confidentiality?

Are there any local groups advertised?

Would you be able to see someone in person or is it all on the phone?

Is there a 24 hour help line available?

Could anything be done to make information on the above issues easier to find and understand?